Hunger, Rebellion and Rage: Adapting *Villette*

**Introduction**

In the last thirty years the critical status of Charlotte Brontë’s final novel, *Villette* (1853), has grown considerably. Lucasta Miller surely expressed a growing consensus when she stated in 2002 that the novel is a ‘stunning achievement’ and Brontë’s ‘masterpiece’ (Miller, 2002: 52, 30). Yet there have been no film adaptations of *Villette*, and the only television adaptations of the novel, one in 1957, and one screened on BBC2 in 1970, are missing, presumed lost, rather like the novel’s unconventional hero, Paul Emmanuel, in the final chapter. Does this matter? Well, it could be argued that the critical reappraisal of *Villette* came rather too late in the twentieth century for the novel to become canonised in Hollywood film adaptations in the manner of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, with direct consequences for the status of *Villette* today, and the likelihood of it being adapted to film in the future. As Thomas Leitch has noted, the recent growth in adaptation studies in universities, often within or adjacent to English departments, has produced ‘a new canon [of literature of the long nineteenth century] shaped by adaptation’ (Leitch, 2011: 14). While this is in many ways an exciting turn in literary and intermedial studies, it may have the effect of replacing one canonical hierarchy (literary ‘quality’) with others (historical popularity, or a text’s being ‘famous for being famous’, or the availability of film and television adaptations), which can be just as rigid.

At the same time, the innumerable plays and films about the Brontë sisters’ lives, from the 1930s to the present day have limited the opportunities for adaptations of the Brontës’ other works (see Miller, 2002: 143-6; Poore, 2012: 138-40). The notion of ‘three brilliant novelists under one roof’ seems to surpass the dramatic potential of the tribulations of a lonely Brussels schoolteacher depicted in *Villette*. Nevertheless, the novel has become a popular text to adapt for radio and theatre, having been broadcast in different adaptations on BBC Radio 4 in 1989, 1999, and 2009, and having inspired four stage adaptations since the 1990s, by Judith Adams, Julia Pascal, Patsy Rodenberg and Lisa Evans. So, rather than lamenting *Villette*’s lack of exposure, we might instead investigate some of the reasons for it being a difficult novel to adapt for the screen, while also considering why, conversely, it has been adapted more frequently for stage and radio. As Leitch goes on to remark, there ‘would be little point in expanding the Victorian canon’ through studies of adaptations, ‘if the new entries did not yield new insights’ (Leitch, 2011: 10). Adaptation, from Leitch’s perspective, allows us to look at the source text with fresh eyes, achieving a critical re-viewing or defamiliarisation that comes as a result of analysing the processes of adaptation that have been considered necessary in turning a novel into a play or radio drama. Similarly, Robert Stam argues for an ‘[i]ntertextual dialogism’ that ‘helps us transcend the aporias of “fidelity”’ (Stam, 2005: 4).

This chapter will begin with a survey of the critical fortunes of *Villette*: what might be characterised as its struggle to obtain autonomy as a novel, rather than as Charlotte Brontë’s thinly-disguised autobiography. It then moves on to consider the problem of transmedial adaptation for a novel that has such a distinctive vision, and that can be interpreted as, in some ways, always-already an adaptation of other texts. The second part of the chapter identifies in more detail a series of perceived or potential problems in adapting *Villette*’s themes of surveillance and education, along with its characterisation of Lucy and Paul, and its ambiguous ending, arguing that the solutions that radio and theatre adapters have found can force us into a reassessment of *Villette’s* power and distinctiveness.

**‘Hunger, rebellion, and rage’**

From its first publication, *Villette* has been the subject of what Miller aptly calls *ad feminam* attacks, especially since Charlotte Brontë by this point was no longer able to conceal her gender and identity behind the pseudonym of Currer Bell (Miller, 2002: 53, 47). What is still surprising today, on reading the contemporary critical responses, is how unapologetically personal they are, and how directly and uncomplicatedly Brontë is assumed to ‘be’ Lucy Snowe, *Villette*’s protagonist. In a grimly comic echo of the surveillance and espionage that characterise the *pensionnat* in the town of Villette where Lucy lives, Brontë seems in these reviews to be constantly scrutinised, her character examined. Anne Mozley’s review of *Villette* in the *Christian Remembrancer* remarks that the author ‘has gained both in amiability and propriety since she first presented herself to the world, - soured, coarse, and grumbling’, as though Brontë had written a series of autobiographies, rather than novels (rpt in O’Neill, 1968: 18). Matthew Arnold lays bare the *ad feminam* tendency of such criticism when he writes in a letter of April 1853 that *Villette* is ‘disagreeable’ because the ‘writer’s mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact put into her book … it will be fatal to her in the long run’ (rpt in Allott, 1974: 201). What is striking about this condemnation is, firstly, the assumed authority with which Arnold claims to be able to see the entire contents of Brontë’s mind; secondly, the complete contrast to Mozley’s assessment of Bronte’s character through her work, quoted above; and thirdly, the pseudo-medical prognosis that such defects ‘will be fatal to her’ (though whether in literary or medical terms it is not quite clear). The confidence of his judgement perhaps calls to mind Paul Emmanuel’s initial examination of Lucy’s physiognomy in *Villette*, where Madame Beck asks him to ‘Read that countenance’ and pronounce on the character there contained (Brontë, 2000: 66-7). In the letter, Arnold follows his condemnation of Brontë’s mind with a more indulgent response to Bulwer-Lytton’s *My Novel*, suggesting that the work of a male author with personal defects can still afford ‘great pleasure’ where a female novelist’s assumed personality is inseparable from her work.

This desire to discipline and punish Brontë for the thoughts and behaviour of the fictional character of Lucy Snowe, and for the fictional events of Labassecour (Brontë’s name for Belgium), might be dismissed as the peculiar mid-Victorian response to female authorship, if it had not continued well into the twentieth century. David Cecil’s 1934 reading of *Villette*, for example, is full of confident assertions of how Charlotte Brontë ‘felt’, how her hand could ‘falter’, to what she was ‘indifferent’, and the ‘restraint’ that her imagination did not know (rpt in O’Neill, 1968: 24-5). Robert A. Colby, writing in 1960, suggests that ‘*Villette* is most fruitfully approached as Charlotte Brontë’s literary, not her literal, autobiography’, a formulation that nevertheless seems to minimise *Villette*’s power as a novel (rpt in O’Neill, 1968: 39). It harks back to reviewers’ strange attempts to re-classify *Villette* in the 1850s when they insisted it was not ‘a novel in the ordinary sense of the word’ (qtd in O’Neill, 1968: 19). They argued that the book’s strength did not lie ‘in the story’ (rpt in Allott, 1974: 179), and asserted that ‘it is the plot alone that is defective’, noting the ‘poverty and scantiness of the material’ (rpt in Allott, 1974: 196). Brontë’s uncontrolled – and monstrously female – channelling of ‘hunger, rebellion and rage’ was considered far too instinctive, even for some of her sympathetic critics, to conform to logical, ‘masculine’ novelistic structural proprieties.

This denial of authorial agency to Brontë is, of course, the flip-side to the success of the ‘Brontë myth’, partly set in motion, as Miller documents, by Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1857 publication of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Miller, 2002: 57-9). The circumstances of Charlotte Brontë’s life’s work take over from the life’s work itself, like a Derridean supplement. As I have argued elsewhere, this can make it very difficult to read the novels *as* novels, since they come to us already saturated in cultural investment in the Brontës’ life stories (Poore, 2012: 128-9). As Catherine Malone has noted, the publisher Smith, Elder’s decision to publish Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and the previously unpublished *The Professor* in rapid succession helped to ensure a positive critical reception for the recently-deceased author’s first novel (Malone, 1996: 175). However, arguably it also helped to cement the public perception that Brontë’s ‘masterpiece’ was her own life, as related by Gaskell, and that therefore *The Professor* and *Villette* were simply coy fictionalisations of the ‘real thing’, that is, Brontë’s time as a student and teacher in Belgium in 1842-3, and her unrequited feelings for her tutor, Constantin Heger.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**‘Old and New Acquaintance’: *Villette* as always-already adapted**

Looked at another way, *Villette* can be read as an adaptation of *The Professor*, which seeks a different perspective through its use of a male narrator, William Crimsworth, to relate events based on Brontë’s experiences in Belgium and at the Pensionnat Heger. While the plots of the two novels differ considerably, they both feature a similar school building with an *allée defendue* (a secluded walkway in the schools’ gardens, out of bounds to pupils); each of their girls’ schools is run by a woman (Mlle Reuter in *The Professor* and Mme Beck in *Villette*) skilled in surveillance and espionage; both novels include a male teacher who spies on his female pupils, and both teacher protagonists, Crimsworth in *The Professor* and Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, assert their authority over an unruly class by ripping a girl’s work in two. Crimsworth, like Lucy, is also prone to ‘hypochondria’ (now understood as depression). Hence, although *Villette* is not a direct adaptation of *The Professor* with regard to plot, the setting and characters often overlap. In addition, as numerous critics have pointed out, *Villette* is in many ways a revisioning of *Jane Eyre*.[[2]](#endnote-2) Given *Jane Eyre*’s success, comparisons with the earlier novel had been inevitable from *Villette*’s first publication. *Puttnam’s Monthly Magazine* made an extended comparison, concluding that *Villette* is ‘quite as bold, original, and interesting, allowing always for the fact that we have had the type in the earlier book’ (rpt in Allott, 1974: 215). As Alison Milbank notes, it is not only the point of view of the narration, or the vivid interior world, that is similar (Milbank, 2009: 91-2). Heather Glen sees *Villette* as in some ways a comic retelling of *Jane Eyre* (Glen, 2001: 197-8).

Hence, a screen adaptation of *Villette* would inevitably be compared with the long list of film and TV adaptations of *Jane Eyre*. This would be an unfair comparison, given *Jane Eyre*’s place in popular and literary culture (which is, it can be argued, itself partly a result of twentieth-century film adaptations). A single adaptation of *Villette* would be burdened with the task of representing everyone’s idea of what the novel is about, where by contrast, we are used to the notion that different adaptations of *Jane Eyre* will emphasise – or expand upon - different aspects of the novel. Mark Bostridge, commenting at the time of the 1999 radio adaptation, further illuminates when he suggests that it is ‘Lucy’s evasiveness, and the reader’s nagging suspicion that she can’t be trusted, that has most discouraged dramatists from adapting *Villette* for other media’ (Bostridge, 1999: n.p.).

**Spying and Surveillance in *Villette***

There are several elements of *Villette* that forcibly remind us of how different the nineteenth century was from today. Especially, perhaps, in turning from the familiarity of the culture-text that is *Jane Eyre* to the lesser-known and less-adapted *Villette*, we are required to rethink the nineteenth century. This is an issue for adaptation, since the rhetoric of transmedial adaptation itself seems to imply that its source text is a ‘story for today’, a work with contemporary relevance.[[3]](#endnote-3) For instance, a would-be adapter of *Villette* to the screen is forced to consider how far to replicate the claustrophobic, scopophilic and oppressive atmosphere of the Rue de Fossette. As Clarke suggests, Catholic culture and surveillance seem to be tied together by the novel’s narrative, in the figures of Madame Beck and Paul Emmanuel, who knows the secret door to the garden of the girls’ school (Clarke, 2011: 977), and ‘constantly spies on his pupils’ (Cohn, 2012: 848). As Margaret L. Shaw notes, both de Hamal and M. Paul spy ‘into the secret interior of women’ by watching them from windows, Paul even employing a spyglass for such a purpose, and defending his practice in terms of being their ‘guardian angel’ (Shaw, 1994: 816). For Boone, however, modern readers (and, I would add, viewers) are likely to interpret the talk of ‘spy glasses, master keys, magic lattices [and] bottom doors’ as Freudian metaphors of penetration (Boone, 1992: 22). In representing this shadowy world of spies and voyeurs, any screen adaptation of *Villette* would risk reproducing a scopophilic ‘male gaze’ that has become politicised by twentieth-century film theory (Mulvey, 1975). To reproduce this ‘male gaze’ would be an especially unwelcome irony, given the centrality of the female gaze to the novel’s narrative action.

In the theatre, where point-of-view is not directed by camerawork, there is a paradoxical sense of being able to observe everything, but only in a limited sense as an individual audience member. There is collective, not individuated, surveillance. Lisa Evans’ adaptation of *Villette* was staged at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough in 2005, a particularly appropriate venue since it is a permanent theatre-in-the-round. The stage entrances were covered by imposing Gothic doors, enhancing the feeling of claustrophobia and espionage (the doors could also be interpreted as confession grilles, or Paul Emmanuel’s observational lattice). In Judith Adams’ 1997 adaptation for the Sheffield Crucible (revived at RADA’s Jerwood Vanburgh Theatre in 2008), the adaptational concept is metatheatrical, with painted flats, ‘As with a Pollock’s theatre played with by a child’ and clothes ‘draped everywhere – masks, puppets, dummies, icons’ (Adams, 1997: 2). The audience is taken into the performance space by Lucy ‘DRESSED LIKE A GREY SHADOW’ with a key around her neck (Adams, 1997: 5). The audience steps inside to find a corridor of distorting mirrors and three men looking at the statue of Cleopatra; all the actors introduce themselves as Lucy Snowe. Here, not only surveillance and espionage are suggested, but also the fractured, intersecting subjectivities that make the novel’s narration compellingly inconsistent. The metatheatricality also corresponds, of course, to the novel’s repeated scenes of performance (such as the Fete in the park and ‘Vashti’, the actress, on stage at the Villette theatre), as well as Lucy’s own self-aware performance as a ‘grey shadow’ (see Boone, 1988: 470).

**The Pensionnat Beck and Education**

Education, a key theme in *Villette*, is one of the most politicised issues in twenty-first-century Anglophone cultures. But it is clear that attitudes towards education have changed enormously since the 1840s, the decade in which Brontë sets the novel. At the Rue de Fossette, the unspoken understanding between the pupils’ parents and Madame Beck is that their daughters should be kept under lock and key in a Spartan finishing-school until they are in a position to be married off. For modern audiences, weaned on film narratives of one idealistic teacher making a difference, the expectation might well be that Lucy does the honourable thing and immediately resigns her untenable position as a teacher in such a corrupt establishment.[[4]](#endnote-4) Rather, Lucy stays and saves her money. Lucy, Mme Beck and Paul Emmanuel have little interest in education as we would understand it today. Lucy makes no secret of choosing favourite pupils with whom to walk out, and recommends the crushing of students’ self-respect – and the deployment of sarcasm – as the best ways to establish order and respect (Brontë, 2000: 83-4). Furthermore, Lucy makes it clear that she (and by extension, the school) has low intellectual expectations of the pupils; for Lucy, this is tied to her chauvinism regarding the superiority of English learners compared to the “swinish multitude” of Labassecourrienne girls (Brontë, 2000: 83).

This populous school setting poses a potential problem for adaptations of the novel. Limited by the prohibitive costs of large companies in the case of theatre, and the limits of the listener being able to track large numbers of voices in radio drama, adaptations of *Villette* typically feature the school as a backdrop rather than a setting. In common with most workplace dramas, the actual hours of repetitive labour are edited in order to focus on the intrigues of the staff. The common practice of theatrical multi-rolling means that actors are not identified with the roles of pupils for more than a few moments, with the exception of Ginevra Fanshawe, who is hardly a victim of the Rue de Fossette, and, in her elopement with the Count de Hamal, could be said to have played Madame Beck at her own game and won. In Adams’ play, the out-of-focus quality of the schoolgirls’ presence is explained by the note that the theatrical space represents the interior of Lucy’s head (Adams, 1997: 2). In Evans’s adaptation, although only three pupils are named (Ginevre [sic], Virginie and Blanche) their appearances are deftly orchestrated to illustrate Lucy’s assumption of a role of authority, Paul’s effect on the classroom, and Lucy’s passionate nature (there is a scene where Lucy climbs onto the window sill during a thunderstorm and announces, to the girls’ consternation, ‘I should knock a nail through the temples of this longing’) (Evans, 2005: 18-20; 57-9; 29).

In fact, Evans’s adaptation, with its brief classroom scenes – all but four of which have well under a hundred lines – throws new light on the atmosphere of the school. The girls, and Mme Beck, refer to the parental pressure that can be brought to bear on stern or wayward teachers, reminding us that the pupils place the staff under surveillance as much as the other way around (Evans, 2005: 20, 29). And, in its rapid switches between lamentation and mirth, the timing brings out the absurdities not only of the girls’ histrionic mood swings, but also how that behaviour is echoed in Lucy and Paul’s comic courtship (Evans, 2005: 74-8).

**Paul Emmanuel**

While M. Paul’s biographical model, Constantin Heger, may have been a bold and innovative educationalist in his time, we only catch glimpses of these methods in the teaching philosophy of Crimsworth in *The Professor* (see Lonoff, 2001: 463-5). In *Villette*, Paul Emmanuel’s pedagogical approach is hardly touched on, and instead we hear successive reports of his bullying, intimidation and harassment of pupils and colleagues. He frequently makes his pupils cry, and seems to have hardly any self-control, on one occasion ‘raving from the estrade almost livid’, and losing his temper with the iron door of a stove (Brontë, 2000: 240). Brontë sets Paul up as the novel’s comic villain in the first three hundred pages, having Lucy exclaim of him: “Really that man was dreadful: a mere sprite of caprice and ubiquity” ((Brontë, 2000: 242). This is rapidly reversed in the last two hundred pages, creating an overall impression that is so contradictory as to be hard to assimilate into conventional notions of character. Indeed, critics have often simply assumed that such unconventional characterisation is incompetence on Brontë’s part; G.H. Lewes highlights her perceived failures of characterisation in his review in the *Westminster Review* (rpt in O’Neill, 1968: 19), while Cecil found Brontë incapable of drawing any character but her own (rpt in O’Neill, 1968: 23-4).

Hence, radio adaptations consistently soften Paul’s behaviour, excising those lines from exchanges which are too suggestive of what Joseph A. Boone calls the ‘beady-eyed despot’ that Paul frequently is in the novel (Boone, 1992: 33). The 1989 adaptation by Valerie Windsor provides an additional backstory for Paul – that he nearly married Zélie St Pierre, one of the teachers at Mme Beck’s school, until he ‘observed the flaws in her character’, implying both a motivation for his constant inquisitorial obstruction of Lucy, and also, strangely, that the memory of his dead fiancée, Justine Marie, had *not* exclusively occupied his affections these last twenty years (Episode 5). Where stage adaptations can play with tone in the moment of performance, radio adaptations have no such flexibility. In the 2009 radio adaptation by Rachel Joyce, Paul is made rather less hypocritical in the encounter before the painting of Cleopatra in the art gallery (Episode 5); rather less ridiculous in his ill-temper at the concert (Episode 5); and his speech at the Hotel Crécy inspires only pleasant feelings in Lucy: ‘You should have seen him smile! His very complexion lightened’ (Episode 6). Again there is the difficulty of adapting both for audiences familiar with *Villette*, and those who have not read the novel and who may, perhaps, not be able to follow a ten-part serial unless there is a more straightforward, teleological romantic development between Lucy and Paul. As Boone points out, ‘Lucy’s experiencing and narrating selves blur indiscriminately’ so that it is never clear whether Lucy is describing what actually happened or, instead, how things felt at that moment (Boone, 1992: 31, n. 21). Thus, the narrative’s treatment of Paul Emmanuel (and Dr John, Ginevra and Madame Beck, to name a few others), varies unpredictably rather than develops in a linear fashion.

**Voicing Lucy Snowe**

A further daunting challenge in adapting *Villette* is Lucy Snowe’s narrative voice, for Lucy is the very definition of the unreliable narrator. Although she details precisely, and often disapprovingly, the spying activities of others, she represents her own surveillance and eavesdropping as innocent (see Shaw, 1994: 823). Lucy hides important information from the reader; as Boone, Shaw, and Litvak note, this is most markedly the case when Lucy reveals that she had been keeping her knowledge that Doctor John was her childhood acquaintance John Graham Bretton from the reader for several chapters (Boone, 1992: 30; Shaw, 1994: 818; Litvak, 1988: 474). By such an action, she ‘double-crosses those policing readers’ (Boone, 1992: 31), engaging in ‘rhetorical one-upmanship’ (Litvak, 1988: 474), but crucially severs the bond of trust between reader and narrator, which the confessional subjectivity of the narrative mode (and, perhaps, the earlier experience of reading *Jane Eyre*) had led us to take for granted.

All four of the adaptations for theatre discussed in this chapter diffuse the problem of the unreliable narrator through some form of metatheatricality, where the single vision of Lucy Snowe is replaced by the presence of a shape-shifting ensemble. In Evans’s *Villette* at Scarborough – a co-production with Frantic Assembly – the characters’ inner impulses were rendered through an energetic physical performance style that was the counterpart to their careful self-monitoring in speech. As noted earlier, Adams’s *Villette* is set in Lucy’s mind, which itself resembles a toy theatre. Patsy Rodenberg’s collaboration with Graeae, *Not Much to Ask*, weaves together testimony from Lucy, from Charlotte Brontë, and from a disabled visitor to the Brontë Parsonage Museum at Haworth.[[5]](#endnote-5) Julia Pascal’s *Charlotte Brontë Goes to Europe* gives Lucy Snowe a distinctive Yorkshire accent, and moves back and forth between the novel’s action and a modern day visitor to Brussels on the Eurostar, who may or not be Lucy, or who may or not have dreamed Lucy’s adventure. Lucy’s accent is used to comic effect when the actress playing her pronounces ‘Cleopatra’ as ‘Cle-o-pattera’, and in the earthy tone of her response to Doctor John, ‘Cultivate Happiness? Happiness is not a potato!’. On the British Library’s recording of the performance, both these lines elicit audience laughter (Pascal, 2000. Recording no. 1CDR0004534).

Radio adaptations tend to rely on the predominance of Lucy’s solo, narrating voice (indeed, the novel also exists in at least three audiobooks, in the Talking Classics, Naxos, and Penguin series, where there is one reader throughout).[[6]](#endnote-6) The 1989 BBC serial uses music sparsely, suggesting location through sound effects (horses’ hooves, a church organ, footsteps), as if to give a Puritan quality of simplicity and transparency to the testimony of Lucy (played by Joanna Mackie). The 2009 adaptation cast Anna Maxwell Martin as Lucy Snowe; at that time the actress was best-known for her much admired performance as Esther in Andrew Davies’ BBC television adaptation of *Bleak House* (2005). This casting perhaps implies a similarity between Esther’s self-effacing narration and that of Lucy, and could be taken as an attempt to make Lucy more likeable or trustworthy. Certainly, Maxwell Martin is able to convey an amused, intriguing tone to her voice, as for instance when she detects Madame Beck in a lie (Episode 3) which invites a wry confidence with the listener, rather than ‘double-crossing’ or ‘one-upmanship’. Indeed, Joyce’s adaptation even includes Lucy’s confession that she had misled the listener concerning her knowledge of John Graham Bretton. The script selects passages from Lucy’s narrative that seem calculated to inspire pathos rather than suspicion or betrayal; Lucy says, ‘But I had kept this to myself. Hidden as if by a cloud, I had freely watched him shine’ (Episode 5). Maxwell Martin’s Lucy weeps a great deal in this adaptation, often accompanied by a Chopin piano theme, which seems like a calculated attempt to assimilate Lucy into the ranks of deserving Victorian heroines.

The most distinctive radio adaptation is the 1999 recording, an adaptation by James Friel, directed by Catherine Bailey. Like the stage adaptations discussed, the serial is set in the claustrophobic, tormented mind of Lucy (played by Catherine McCormack). The opening words are a whispered ‘What are you? Who are you? Are you anything at all?’, and the adaptation consistently, and daringly, stages Lucy’s inner dialogues and self-reprimands, with complex soundscapes of overlapping voices and melancholy music, including a repeated guitar figure that punctuates shifts of thought or feeling. Of all the adaptations discussed here, Friel and Bailey’s is the most Gothic rendering of a novel that has been interpreted as switching with bewildering unpredictability between Gothic and realist modes.[[7]](#endnote-7) In comparison, the BBC radio adaptation that followed in 2009, seems like a reaction to this aural intensity of feeling. Paradoxically, however, Friel considered his adaptation to have been more straightforward because it dispenses with the ‘wicked authorial game’ whereby Lucy is in full control of the narrative, yet repeatedly misdirects the reader (qtd in Bostridge, 1999: n.p.).

**‘There is enough said’: the ending of *Villette***

The last adaptation challenge I want to consider is *Villette*’s highly ambiguous ending: a ‘notoriously inconclusive ending’, according to Litvak (1988: 488-9); an ending of ‘radical uncertainty’ for Boone, which offers ‘no teleological finality’ to the narrative (1992: 38, 30); an ending which ‘provides no validating closure to the attention [the novel] has lavished on Lucy Snowe for nearly six hundred pages’, observes Gretchen Braun (2011: 189); for Lucy Armitt, the final two sentences provide an ‘almost satirically false anti-climax’ to the story (2002: 227). To attempt to translate it into another medium immediately raises problems. How to weight those rhythmic sentences, so significant and yet so terse, and on the surface so neutral? But the surprising evasiveness of the ending also draws the potential adapter’s attention to other points in the novel where – unlike *Jane Eyre*, unlike *The Professor* – it is simply not clear where Lucy has come from and what has happened to her. Armitt and Braun both argue that the loss of Lucy’s family is a trauma which shapes the novel by its absences and evasions (Armitt, 2002: 225; Braun, 2011: 190).

Only Evans’ adaptation, of the four theatre texts, ends with (some of) the words of *Villette’*s closing passage, delivered in direct audience address, albeit without the final remarks on the fate of the ‘secret junta’. Pascal and Rodenberg’s adaptations end with a return from the novel’s imaginative landscape, providing a metatheatrical jolt. The former’s final moments bring us back to the Eurostar, and Rodenberg’s script presents us with much of the text of ‘Finis’ (the final chapter), but follows on with biographical details of Charlotte Brontë and, seemingly, a return to the ‘institution’ for disabled people in which the adaptation is set: a man says: ‘You put the book away. Then the dream can end’ (Rodenberg, n.d: 39). For me, the most interesting fusion of theatrical and literary languages is Judith Adams’ end sequence, where Mme Walravens puts a paper boat in the basin of water, which Lucy wrecks as the howl of a Banshee is heard (Adams, n.d: 142). One of the actors (representing Paul) dies, but suddenly sits up and demands of Lucy, ‘go on with your story’, placing his frock coat on her. He adds: ‘Play you must, play you shall. I am planted there.’ As he attempts to dictate what she should be writing, she ‘holds up her hand to silence him, they smile at each other, she goes on writing’ (Adams, n.d: 142). Torn letters fall onto the stage, as voices softly repeat, ‘Lucy Snowe’ (Adams, n.d: 143). This ending seems to me to find a theatrical translation for the novel’s closing sequence, and one which also acknowledges Lucy Snowe in the act of composing her history (and hers alone). It is an ending that does not seek out the wider validation of Charlotte Brontë’s life, but instead, unlike so many critics, responds to *Villette* on its own terms.

**Conclusion**

It is fascinating to note the almost-perfectly balanced forces of opposition at play in the seven adaptations considered here. Of the four play texts, two decide that it is impossible to detach the figure of Charlotte Brontë from a rendering of *Villette*, and two decide that *Villette* must be considered on its own. Of the three radio adaptations, spaced at regular ten-year intervals, it is hard to imagine that the adapters did not consider the previous BBC radio versions. Consequently we have a stripped-down and straightforward soundscape in 1989, a complex, claustrophobic Gothic mix in 1999, and a return to aural simplicity in 2009. The pendulum swings back and forth between the realist and Gothic modes. And, while there is perhaps something very satisfying for scholars of *Villette* about the idea of historical redress in Adams’s and Evans’s versions – finally allowing Lucy, and the novel, the textual autonomy that they have been consistently denied since 1853 – inevitably such an act involves a conscious renunciation of knowledge about Charlotte Brontë that we already possess. So these adaptations, taken together, remain, like Lucy, evenly poised between ‘Reason and Feeling’ (Brontë, 2000: 253), between knowledge and forgetting. Long may we lack a ‘definitive’ adaptation of *Villette*.

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1. Even in a 2004 biography for children, *Charlotte Brontë: The Girl Who Turned her Life into A Book* by Kate Hubbard, Brontë’s ability to spin her life into literary gold with *Jane Eyre* is the main theme. *Villette* is mentioned only once (‘Battling against depression and bad health, she managed to write her fourth novel’ [2004: 78) and does not even feature on her time-line at the end of the book (Hubbard, Kate, *Charlotte Brontë*, London: Short, 2004: 88). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To complicate the picture further, both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* can be read as adaptations of the Bluebeard story (Kim, 2011: 410). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, Judith Adams is quoted on a flyer for the Sheffield Crucible production of her adaptation that ‘*Villette* is an astonishingly modern novel … a book long overdue for theatrical investigation.’ (Adams, *Villette*, BL Manuscript 7543: 2). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Films and television series focusing on influential teachers include *Dead Poets’ Society* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1995)*, Goodbye Mr Chips* (2002), *School of Rock* (2003)*,*and *Glee* (2011-2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “When I visited Haworth and the museum/ They allowed me to be carried through the ground floor rooms … I saw the room where Charlotte write. / I couldn’t go upstairs” (Rodenberg, Patsy, *Not Much to Ask*, BL manuscript 2141: 2). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The readers are Juliet Stevenson (Penguin), Carole Boyd (Talking Classics) and Mandy Weston (Naxos). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Robert B. Heilman’s [1958] distinction between Brontë’s ‘old Gothic’, ‘anti-Gothic’ and ‘new Gothic’ modes (qtd. in O'Neill, *Critics,* 32-6) and Colby [1960], qtd. in O'Neill, *Critics,* 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)